The Light Shines in the Darkness John 1:1-18 Christmas Eve Meditation
December 24, 1984

The writer of Genesis needed, in a few words, to lay the foundation for the story of God and his people. These words, written thousands of years ago, have become the prologue to the Bible:

> In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void: and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light."

Here we have the components of a definite view of the world and life and history. "Darkness, without form and void" - until God acts, and then there is light. It is a theme that appears again and again throughout the Bible. The plaintiff cry of Job: "I am hemmed in by darkness, and thick darkness covers my face." The Prophet Isaiah, describing a struggling and despairing Israel: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined."

Throughout the Old Testament we can feel the polarization: on the one hand the cosmic darkness before creation, the darkness of existence apart from God. And on the other hand the creation of light as ~~the~~ God's first act: the light of a bush burning in the desert: a pillar of fiery light illuminating the way through the ~~dark~~ wilderness: the saving acts of God shining through Israel's otherwise gloomy history.

The Biblical writers are joined by other philosophers of history in their idea of darkness and light. ~~A great man once said~~ Eleanor Roosevelt, a woman who did a great deal to shine some light once said: "A far better thing it is to light a candle, than to curse the darkness." But a candid look at the human story reveals than man's candles have not been durable. Some have lasted longer than others, but one by one they have disappeared into the darkness. The high points of history are the wars, the struggles that pitted man against man. ~~For every lasting peace there has been an ensuing bloody war.~~

The ongoing stream of history is a story of men battling darkness, - the darkness of ignorance, bigotry, pride and hatred. The brief candles met have lighted and thrust bravely into the darkness night have been no match for the forces of darkness.

Today the words of the Prophet penetrate the barrier of 3,000 years with their eternal relevance. We are still a people who walk in darkness. The present is more comfortable than the past. But still we battle the darkness of ignorance and poverty; the darkness of war and bloodshed. In the words of Tennyson,"However we brave it out, we men are a little breed."

Tonight we have gathered to celebrate the coming of light into the world. But this light is different. Man did not ignite this light we celebrate: it was not the result of man's best and highest hope: it does not depend on man's noblest efforts. This light was begun by God. For twenty centuries it has burned in the midst of history's darkness. It has been opposed, it has been ignored: it has flickered low in storms of hatred and tragedy; but it has not gone out. It burns still because it is the same quality of light that came over the formless void in the beginning, and shone down on the misery of captive Israel. It burns still because its fuel is the power and justice and love of Almighty God.

Man lights his candles amidst the fanfare and acolade: man delebrates his self-created light with great gatherings and speeches. This light came into the world in the simplest of ways. Absent were the tangible signs of a momentous event. There was only a mother, and the agony and pain and love which is human birth.

The lights of the world burned in other places that night. In Bethlehem homes, in palaces, in road houses filled with travelers. And in the darkness of a stable the true light came into the world.

Accept a bit of light for yourself. Allow it to gleam, dispelling the darkness all about.

We have indulged in a bit of symbolic ritual. We have accepted a small flame. And together the light from our candles fills the sanctuary. But tonight, on this night of nights, we must not be guilty of empty symbolism, or trite gesture. For on this night, God's own light came into the world. On this night the love of God reached down and embraced man, calling him out of the darkness. On this night in Bethlehem of Judea, a child was born who is the light of the world.

This is what we celebrate: not the sentiment and glow of a candle, but the unspeakable gift of God's light, light that casts out fear, light that dispells all darkness.

As the light created by our ritual fills this sanctuary, may the true light of Jesus Christ be rekindled in the sanctuaries of our hearts. As we leave this place may that light go with us, shining into every corner of our lives, and through our lives, into every corner of the world.

Let us rejoice! for Jesus Christ is born, and "in him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Amen

Almighty and Eternal God, fulfill and enrich our Christmas celebration. May the lighting of these small candles mark the renewal of our faith. May the light cast by their gleaming together be symbolic of the light of Jesus Christ in our lives. O Eternal God, accept our words of humble gratitude on this night and accept the rededication of ourselves. With thy guidance, may we find the way; with thy light may all darkness be dispelled. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen